DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 292 143 CS 506 058

AUTHOR Kane, Peter E.
TITLE Western Culture in Japanese Film: Kurosawa's "Throne of Blood" and "Ran."
PUB DATE Oct 87
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the New York Conference on Asian Studies (Brockport, NY, October 2-3, 1987).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Content Analysis; *Cultural Context; Drama; *Film Criticism; Film Study; Foreign Countries; *Foreign Language Films; Intercultural Communication; Playwriting
IDENTIFIERS Filmic Styles; Japan; Japanese Culture; King Lear; *Kurosawa (Akira); Macbeth; Shakespeare (William); *Throne of Blood

ABSTRACT

Akira Kurosawa, the most popular Asian film maker with audiences in the United States, has found in William Shakespeare's plays themes and plots that resonate within Japanese culture. While the translations of "Macbeth" into "Throne of Blood" and "King Lear" into "Ran" are quite direct and literal with only minor changes in plot and emphasis, in many places Kurosawa's interpretation of the stories gives them a very Japanese flavor. For example, his use of the traditions of "No" drama transforms the story of "Macbeth" into something uniquely Japanese. At the same time, the director's free use of vivid color and skillful filming of spectacle produce a psychological appeal that transcends geography and culture to reach audiences throughout the world. Kurosawa's films are readily accessible and understandable to Western film audiences. (JK)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED292143

WESTERN CULTURE IN JAPANESE FILM:

KUROSAWA'S "THRONE OF BLOOD" AND "RAN"

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Peter E. Kane

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Peter E. Kane

State University of New York,

College at Brockport

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Without a doubt the most popular Asian film maker with audiences in the United States is Akira Kurosawa. The only person that would even begin to challenge this position is the Indian film maker Satyajit Ray. Since it cannot be shown that Kurosawa is substantially more skillful than Ray or other Asian film makers such as Kon Ichikawa ("The Burmese Harp," "Fire on the Plain"), Kenji Mizoguchi ("Ugetsu," "Princess Yang Kwei Fei"), or Nagisa Oshima ("The Ceremony," "Realm of Passion"); the source of Kurosawa's popularity must lie elsewhere. His productive life of 43 years to date between his first ("Sanshiro Sugata" 1943) and most recent ("Ran" 1986) film is a record of productivity that must be taken into account. However, in the final analysis Kurosawa's popularity can be adequately accounted for only by recognizing that many of his films are more accessible and understandable to Western film audiences than the films of most all his Asian colleagues.

The accessibility of Kurosawa's films is nowhere better illustrated than with "Seven Samuri" (1954) or "Yojimbo" (1961). We

CS506058

recognize both as classic Hollywood Westerns where the good gunfighter, either alone or in a group, routes the bad guys and restores peace and order to the frontier community. In fact John Sturges remade "Seven Samuri" as "The Magnificent Seven" (1960), and "Yojimbo" borrows heavily from "Shane" (1953) and "High Noon" (1952), both of which had been extremely popular with Japanese film audiences.

Rather than discuss the well worn Western connection, the subject matter for this paper is a different cross cultural connection--that between Kurosawa and William Shakespeare. In many ways William Shakespere is the quintessential playwright of Western culture, but Kurosawa has found in Shakespeare themes and plots that resonate within Japanese culture. The two plays used by Kurosawa, "Macbeth" and "King Lear," share many common characteristics and are unlike the other Shakespeare plays with the possible exception of "Hamlet." Historians of English literature date both plays at 1606 (though "Lear," the earlier play, may have been written in 1605). Although Macbeth was apparently an historic Scot king, both plays really grow out of English legend. Both plays are more or less set in the feudal Eleventh Century, and both deal with royalty that come to a tragic end. "Macbeth," the more accessible of the two plays, is a more or less straightforward story of the downfall of military hero whose ambition turns him into a multiple murderer. A coherent short synopsis of "Lear" is just about impossible. In broadest outline the king divides his kingdom between his two elder daughters who betray him while the misunderstood youngest daughter seeks to save her father. By the play's end almost everybody is dead.

I

The translation of "Macbeth" into "Throne of Blood" is quite direct and literal with only minor changes in plot and emphasis. Kurosawa appears to recognize that Japanese feudal society was very similar to feudal society in the British Isles even though the specific time of the film is probably 600 years later than the time of "Macbeth." In both play and film an honored general murders his lord in order to become lord himself. Such succession in societies governed by shifting loyalties and the sword is easily understood and accepted by both Japanese and Western audiences as is the climax of the action in which both Macbeth and Washizu are killed in retaliation for their act of betrayal.

While the plot of "Macbeth" is borrowed very directly, in many places Kurosawa's interpretation of the story gives it a very Japanese flavor. The best place to perceive this flavor is in the treatment of the two female characters in the film--the witch and Lady Asaji (Lady Macbeth). Both owe their realization to the influence of Nō drama. Within that theatrical tradition the witch is a very familiar character as a kind of ghost who can foretell the future. The evil intent of Shakespeare's three witches is foreign to the Nō tradition and absent from Kurosawa's film. Lady Asaji's character and presentation also spring directly out of Nō. This, Kurosawa s first evil female film character, is transformed into a far greater villain than Lady Macbeth. She clearly drives the action and directs her weak husband Washizu. In "Macbeth" husband and wife are really far more like co-conspirators. Lady Asaji's dress and actions also have their origin in Nō. She moves in the stylized manner of the Nō actor while her face and its makeup

strongly resemble a Nō mask. The film viewer is forced to conclude that Kurosawa intends to call attention to the similarity in the contests between good and evil in "Macbeth" and traditional Nō drama.

One final difference between Shakespeare's original and the Kurosawa film needs to be noted. At the end of the play Shakespere's Macbeth, a character with many noble qualities, is killed offstage as an act of revenge by Macduff. In the film the fundamentally weak and fearful Washizu is turned upon by his own men who shoot his body full of arrows in a terrifying and compelling death scene that almost seems to be filmed in slow motion. The conventions of late Twentieth Century film making, both East and West, are far removed from those of the early Seventeenth Century English stage.

II

In "Ran" Kurosawa places the "King Lear" story in the same feudal Japanese setting as was used in "Throne of Blood." In fact the second castle in "Ran" bears a striking resemblance to Lord Washizu's castle in "Throne of Blood." The basic "Lear" myth is a variation on the Cinderella story, and most scholars agree that Shakespeare based his work in large part on an earlier Lear play that had been produced in 1594. However, for Kurosawa the Cinderella story would not work since feudal Japanese society did not recognize women's legal rights such as the right of inheritance. Thus, Lear's daughters become Lord Hidetora's three sons. In the Cinderella story and "Lear" the focus of the tragedy is on selfishness and greed. In "Ran" the story is transformed into one of revenge reinforced by a younger son's jealousy in a society governed by the right of primogeniture.

The principal movers of the drama in "Ran" are the Great Lord Hidetora, his first son Taro's wife Lady Kaede, and the jealous second son Jiro. Hidetora is modeled closely on Shakespere's Lear, but the other two characters have no such model and are products of Kurosawa's creative imagination. With the aid of two loyal retainers, Lord Jiro plots and carries out the murder of his elder brother and the sexual conquest(?) of his brother's wife Lady Kaede. In Lady Kaede the audience meets once again Lady Asaji (Lady Macbeth). Kurosawa makes her the clear villain of the film, the one directly responsible for the tragic outcome of the story. Like Lady Asaji, Lady Kaede provokes her weak husband, Lord Taro, to act against his father--action that leads directly to Taro's death in a battle with his younger brother's army. In her subsequent encounter with Lord Jiro it is Lady Kaede who clearly dominates physically, psychologically, and sexually. She is able to demand and receive the head of Jiro's wife, Lady Sué--one of the two truly innocent victims in all the bloodshed of the film. In the course of the film it is revealed that Hidetora had at some earlier time killed Lady Kaede's father in battle and had taken her family's land. In fact she and Taro live in what had been her family's castle. The major plot line of the film is the working out of her revenge on Hidetora and all his family. At the end of "Ran" (like "Lear") all the principal players are dead leaving only the loyal Tango (the Earl of Kent in Shakespere's play) and some minor characters to carry on and attempt to rebuild.

This description of "Ran" should demonstrate that the story is fully as convoluted and obscure as Shakespeare's "King Lear." The popularity and critical acclaim for "Ran" lie almost entirely in its

visual elements. Kurosawa's early desire to be a painter finds expression in his use of setting, movement, and color on the screen. In fact, Kurosawa's color paintings helped to make up the story board for the film. Without doubt the wonderful use of vivid color and the skillful filming of spectacle produce a psychological appeal that transcends geography and culture and even overcomes the audience's confusion generated by the highly complex plot.

III

In this paper I have examined two films of Akira Kurosawa that are based on two plays by William Shakespeare. In both cases Kurosawa has taken the material and made it his own. "Throne of Blood" is quite faithful to Shakespeare's "Macbeth" reflecting a recognition of the similarities of the feudal cultures in which the stories take place. However, through the use of the traditions of Nō drama Kurosawa transforms the story into something uniquely Japanese. This transformation may account for the lack of any great popular response to the film by audiences in the United States.

In many ways "Ran" departs quite substantially from the Cinderella "King Lear" story from which it is drawn. The principal characters--Lord Jiro and Lady Kaede--and their motives along with the working out of the story are far more Japanese than Western. Nevertheless the film has received both popular and critical acclaim including the Academy Award for best foreign film (if the Motion Picture Academy had any class, "Ran" would have been nominated and selected as best picture of the year). The powerful visual appeal of the film transcends culture to reach audiences throughout the world. Such response shows once again that film is essentially a visual medium of communication.